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RUCNASE/ASEAN MEMBER COLLECTIVE
RUEHGG/UN SECURITY COUNCIL COLLECTIVE
RUEHBY/AMEMBASSY CANBERRA 0900
RUEHNE/AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI 4460
RUEHUL/AMEMBASSY SEOUL 7991
RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO 5552
RUEHCHI/AMCONSUL CHIANG MAI 1380
RHHMUNA/CDR USPACOM HONOLULU HI
RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK 1332
RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHDC
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 RANGOON 000114

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DEPT FOR EAP/MLS, DRL, AND IO
PACOM FOR FPA

E.O. 12958: DECL: 02/12/2018

TAGS: PGOV PREL PHUM BM

SUBJECT: CENSORING THE BURMESE PRESS

REF: A. A: RANGOON 67

1B. B: RANGOON 57

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Classified By: Poloff Chelsia Wheeler for Reasons 1.4 (b) & (d)

11. (C) SUMMARY. The Printing and Press Scrutiny Board, comprised of 20 low-level officers, reads and censors every written publication in Burma. The board deletes all taboo material from printed media in the country, including anything critical of the government. Because of low wages for these officers, corruption throughout the censorship process remains rampant, and sensitive material slips past the board. The censorship law provides the GOB with a useful tool to imprison political prisoners and those associated with them. END SUMMARY.

The Publication Process

12. (C) Publication in Burma starts with obtaining a publisher's license, said Thiha Saw, editor and owner of Myanma Dana Business Magazine, a monthly publication he has run since its founding in 1990. The Ministry of Information controls licenses. The same Ministry can revoke licenses at any time, he said, although usually officials wait until they have issued a few warnings before revoking a license. Printers and publishers lease their licenses from the Ministry and can only publish on the topic described in their contract. Thiha Saw noted that no hard news licenses are given to independent publications. Therefore, most of the publications specialize in sports, business, or fashion news.

13. (SBU) According to Burma's 1962 Printers and Publishers Registration Law, all informational materials, including video and print media, must get the advance approval of the Printing and Press Scrutiny Board. Even handwritten statements must be licensed and approved before they can be photocopied and distributed to the public. Violating this law can land a person in prison for up to seven years, and the GOB notoriously uses the law to justify imprisoning political activists.

¶4. (C) The Press Scrutiny Board consists of approximately 20 low-ranking government officers who must read everything that is published in the country, said Thiha Saw. Overseeing their work are four or five section heads who all report to a director, currently Major Tin Swe of the Ministry of Information. The 20 low-ranking officers rotate to different topics every three months in order to avoid developing sympathy for any particular publication. To clear the censorship process, publications can take anywhere from a few days for private weekly papers to years for books and artwork that the board may deem inappropriate.

¶5. (C) Once a publication passes the Press Scrutiny Board, and the publisher has made all the required changes, it may be distributed. To illustrate the process, Thiha Saw showed Poloff an edition of his magazine with the Scrutiny Board's edits and the final published version. Sometimes whole articles had been deleted, but more often paragraphs of articles and cartoons were censored. In order to avoid reworking the layout for the entire magazine, and because the board requires that they leave no blank space where articles have been censored, Myanma Dana inserts self-advertisements to fill up space.

Taboo Topics

¶6. (C) Publications in Burma, according to the Press Scrutiny Board, must all promote national unity, said Thiha Saw. This means that anything that is political, relates to labor strikes, criticizes China, or discusses the poor economy cannot be published. Anything critical of the United States or that discusses casualties in Iraq, on the other hand, will pass the board. The board even censors international new magazines, such as "Newsweek" and "Time," by ordering shops to cut out all taboo articles individually before they can

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sell the journals.

¶7. (C) The uncensored version of Thiha Saw's magazine contained cartoons that discussed the booming transistor radio industry in the country and paragraphs critical of China's poor policy on electronic waste. These were replaced by advertisements in the final copy. With some pride, however, Thiha Saw showed Poloff a cartoon in the final version that was written in English and showed people holding signs saying "Overthrow the government" and "Revolt." He attributed the oversight on the part of the Press Scrutiny Board to a continuing severe work overload.

¶8. (C) Taboo topics, however, change with the directors of the boards and the political situation, asserted Ko Mrat of Embassy-funded group Art.com who has been awaiting final approval for his poetry and art anthology books for several months. Since September 2007, he complained, all art exhibits must be photographed and submitted to the board. Artwork with slanted pagodas, too much red, and too much black is banned because the government believes they display hidden political messages referring to the September protests. Censors will ban shows displaying the work of politically active artists or those with the same names as such artists, including artist U Win Pe who currently resides in the United States. Additionally, said Ko Mrat, artists and publishers must have captions that identify all people in their paintings, and all video images of karaoke movies must match the lyrics of the song.

Corruption Throughout the Process

¶9. (C) Because the 20 members of the Printing and Press Scrutiny Board make only approximately 40,000 kyat (USD 33) per month, corruption runs rampant throughout the process, declared Thiha Saw. While publishers cannot pay bribes to

slip taboo material past the censorship board, they can pay a little extra to make sure their publications pass quickly. In this way, Thiha Saw estimates that the junior board members make as much as \$100 extra per month. He also said that all of the amenities at the director's residence such as air conditioning units are "donations" from printers and publishers.

¶10. (C) In rare instances, and in exchange for a bribe, police will turn a blind eye on material published without the requisite licenses. One example of this, said Ko Mrat, is the booming pornography industry. In Burma, the staple of the industry are small hand-written cartoon books sold in large quantities on the streets of major cities. A friend of Ko Mrat, who publishes these books, sells approximately 5,000 copies per month, making a profit of 400 kyat (USD 0.33) per book. His monthly income, therefore, is approximately USD 1,650, an enormous sum by Burmese standards, where most people earn less in an entire year.

Using the press law to justify arrests

¶11. (C) The GOB frequently uses the Printers and Publishers Registration Law to file charges against political prisoners.

Recently ten 88 Generation Students, including Min Ko Naing and Ko Ko Gyi, were charged under the law for failing to register pro-democracy materials that they published (Ref A).

Thiha Saw also asserted that the government set up the poet, Saw Wai, who was arrested on January 22 for publishing a poem with a hidden anti-government message (Ref B). Saw Wai, who has become known recently as a political activist, runs a tea shop that provides a popular rendezvous point for young activists. He sent the poem to the magazine over a year ago, said Thiha Saw, and when the government needed an excuse to arrest him, they had one available.

¶12. (C) Comment. The Than Shwe regime uses censorship to maintain its hold on power. Through censorship, the GOB tries to control the information the people living inside the country can access. However, people all over Burma receive

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uncensored information through the radio, Internet, and other sources. Many of the journalists working with the private press have become skillful at getting relevant information to their audiences over the eyes of the censors. For instance, a fashion magazine published an article about child soldiers in Africa. Few people take the government newspapers seriously. The government may control the media, but it does not control hearts and minds. End Comment.

VILLAROSA